

The Prospect Project Points Of Demonstration

Project Location

This project is located on the ridge on top of the I-90 Tunnel, in the "Thumbs Up!" neighborhood, at 1326 30th Avenue South (on the corner of 30th Avenue South and South Irving Street). The townhouse in question is one of a pair of townhouses originally completed together in December 1997.

Housing Statement and Intention to Build

Currently one household is served by each of the two townhouses.

Successful completion of this project would allow one of these particular townhouses to serve two households by adding an "ADU." This would create a typical single family + ADU situation with one dwelling unit owned and one rented. The smaller dwelling unit on the ground floor would be the "accessory dwelling unit."

Should this proposal prove successful, we will move with all appropriate promptness to go ahead and install a kitchen sink, small stove, and refrigerator!



Two views of the Prospect Townhouses
(Bottom photo by Ben Benschneider and the Seattle Times)

Affordability Features

This proposition is based on the idea that housing will become more affordable if the overall supply is increased, both by increased density and by the provision of accessory dwelling units. There is much agreement that establishment of "accessory dwelling units" could provide the quickest, most affordable, and most friendly supply of affordable housing units that there could be. We think that Seattle's unique topography is suitable for development of "custom townhouses" with Accessory Dwelling Units. This would allow a household to own a potentially less expensive version of single family housing, a townhouse, and to support that ownership by renting out an ADU, providing another affordable unit. An ADU in this situation would rent for about \$500/month. This would be affordable for a single person earning \$18,000/year which is 45% of median income.

Cracking the Code

"They Said It Couldn't Be Done"

Seattle Municipal Code (SMC) Section 23.44.041 "Accessory Dwelling Units," is too restrictive and needs to be changed in several ways to allow greater provision of this type of affordable housing. The section allows accessory dwelling units in "single family dwellings." But isn't a townhouse a "single family dwelling?"

Our project specifically asks that the definition of a "single family dwelling" be changed in SMC 23.44.032 "Residential Use" #9 so that it would include short-platted townhouses which are ground-related single family houses that happen to be built right next to each other and are often connected by flashing. The definition currently reads:

"9. "Single-family dwelling unit" means a detached structure containing one (1) dwelling unit and having a permanent foundation. The structure may also contain an accessory dwelling unit."

We propose that the term "detached structure" would be qualified by an additional phrase so that the definition would then read:

"9. "Single-family dwelling unit" means a detached structure, or a short-platted townhouse or rowhouse, which shall be structurally separate, but may be attached with flashing or siding, containing one (1) dwelling unit and having a permanent foundation. The structure may also contain an accessory dwelling unit."

Neighborhood Acceptability/ Consistency with Neighborhood Plan

We have had three major "open-house" events at our project wherein we have explained our proposal to create the ADU. The first event was on January 1, 1998 and included friends, all the neighbors, and people from all over the community. The second



event was an evening event and broadened the invitation to people from other neighborhoods. The third event was a very large open-house occasioned by our project being recognized as the Seattle Times / AIA "Home of the Month." Anyone in the Seattle Times readership area was invited by an article in the Sunday paper entitled "Townhouses Are Good Dense Infill-Housing Option." That open house was attended by over 1,000 people. We can furnish copies of their "Home-of-the-Month" ballots that they filled out at that open house. We raised the ADU issue at these events and pointed to our project as a case study example. We handed out over 300 articles and book excerpts on ADUs. We found almost universal support of the concept in general and of our project specifically.

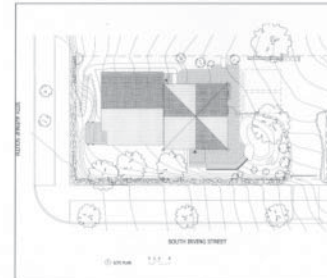
We are fairly long-term residents on this block (13 years), we know virtually all the neighbors (e.g. Brogan is the block watch captain), and we are committed to making the neighborhood better. Our project is consistent with the neighborhood plan in that we are zoned L-1 and we are surrounded by properties zoned L-1 and L-2.



History of the Project

This whole project started when Mrs. W. offered to sell us her old house.

She wanted to move, so we bought the house, even though it had no foundation and was in some disrepair, because we wanted to build an example of our idea of quality housing...



The lot is 45' x 100' or 4,500 Sq. Ft. We would have been allowed to build 3 units there but in 1989-90 the area's zoning was "re-mapped." This re-mapped version of L-1 down-zoned our lot and made it possible for us to build only two units at 1,600 sq. ft. of lot area /unit, with a relatively low 25' wall plate height. (If we had only 300 sq. ft. more of lot area we could have still built 3 units under this re-mapping. But the re-mapping left us a mere 6% short of lot area!)

On the other hand if we had allowed our lot to be down-zoned to single-family we could have built a much bigger bulk building with a 30' wall plate height(!) and included an accessory dwelling unit no-questions-asked, still two units, but in a much bigger building.

But we decided to build a duplex instead. When we were halfway finished building, we decided to apply for a short-plat to turn the duplex into two townhouses. We did this for several reasons.

Townhouses

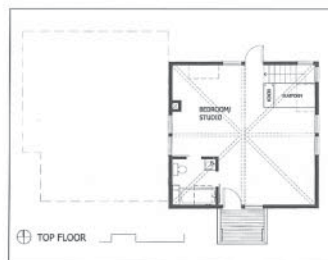
Historically, townhouses have been a prolific and varied type of urban housing in cities all over the world. From the "brownstones" in New York City to the row houses of Amsterdam, London, Boston or Philadelphia, many of these townhouses traditionally include accessory dwelling units.

The Seattle Municipal Code (SMC) defines a townhouse as:

"SMC 23.44.038 "T."

"Townhouse" means a form of ground-related housing in which individual dwelling units are attached along at least one (1) common wall to at least one (1) other dwelling unit. Each dwelling unit occupies space from the ground to the roof and has direct access to private open space. No portion of a unit may occupy space above or below another unit, except that townhouse units may be constructed over a common shared parking garage, provided the garage is underground."

The term "townhouse" sometimes gets confused through its association with condominiums. The important distinction for us is that the townhouse is on its own little piece of land, its own real property. This makes it a better investment as a dwelling than a condominium, but this also means that it's a more affordable version of essentially single-family housing because it's a smaller building on a smaller lot. If an accessory dwelling unit is included, the townhouse becomes more affordable still.



Site Design

One townhouse is shingle clad and faces west, even though its entrance is on its east side. This makes it possible for us to have yet another entrance on the west side which can be used for a home office, or in this proposal, as an entrance to an ADU underneath.

The slope allows both the townhouse above and the ADU below to be ground-related.

The other townhouse is metal clad and faces to the south.

We also take advantage of the slope to step the townhouses down the hill, complying with the height limit and improving the views.

The height of the lot above the sidewalk (and the resulting steep slope created due to the original street cut) make it reasonable to enter the two principal townhouses from the parking area. This is also suitable for pedestrian approach because it is on the uphill side (less slope) and closer to the bus line on 31st Avenue South.

Pursuant to SMC 23.44.041.A.7, we would request that the need for an additional parking space for the ADU be waived because, (1) we're not in the U-District or Alki, (2) the topography is steep, (3) adequate parking exists on the street, and (4) the bus line is half a block away.

Seattle is anything but flat, and Seattleites probably don't want townhouses to all look alike. So our idea was to explore a "custom townhouse" concept to try to see how it could work in Seattle's varied topography.

We think every site in Seattle is unique, and just as "craftsman bungalows" have been adapted to the variety of topographies here, so too can townhouses. Our lot proved to be an ideal test site for this hypothesis.

We were able to orient the two townhouses in two different directions because of our corner lot. We gave each its own architectural character.

A primary goal for this project was to build two high quality townhouse buildings, using good materials and creative detailing. The city of Seattle should seek to provide incentives for building quality, not just code compliance. We want this city to continue to be recognized as having a high quality housing stock, as opposed to housing shlock.

One incentive could be favorable code interpretation when quality projects merit consideration as "design demonstrations" that can be held up as examples.

Another goal here was to provide differing plans that might offer a different fit for some of today's varied households, as opposed to a formulaic rubber stamp plan based on some demographic marketing mean.

At the same time, there is currently a tremendous demand for affordable housing units in the city. With a modicum of latitude in the Municipal Code, we could simultaneously provide both good quality and increased quantity of housing here. A simple addition of an accessory dwelling unit in this project would provide an affordable housing unit for someone in need.

This is a simple and straightforward proposal. Only the current definition of a single-family dwelling as being necessarily detached prevents the addition of an ADU to a townhouse. We are not asking for a drastic change in the code with this proposal, but are simply trying to maximize the flexibility of the townhouse form when conditions warrant. Such a code change would not overwhelm the city with new requests for ADUs, but it would provide a creative housing option for a city that needs more affordable housing units. This proposal also adds a dwelling unit with very little effect on the surrounding neighborhood.

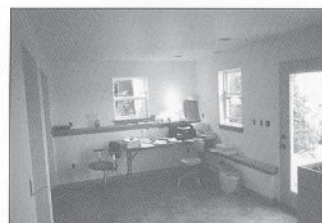
We think if Seattle is to try and have a rule for everything, then Seattle has to recognize a huge variety of specific circumstances and details. The wheels need to grind very fine in recognition of complexity or we risk over-simplification.



Well-crafted (Ceiling Framing)



Imaginative Use of Materials (Deck Rail and Scupper)



"Ancillary units, or second units, create affordable rental units without changing the character and quality of single-family areas. They can also serve to offset housing costs for the primary unit, provide needed space for a teenager or elderly family member, or act as transitional housing. Ancillary units can be provided in residential areas, either as part of the primary home or above a garage. Development fees should be waived in recognition of the larger benefits by this type of housing. . .

. . . Ancillary units are strongly encouraged to provide rental housing opportunities and to meet the increasing demand for a variety of housing types. They also increase the density of an area without changing the pattern of single-lot private ownership which traditionally has a very strong market. As a source of affordable rental housing they avoid the "institutional" character of many apartment projects and the segregation of low-income groups."

— Peter Calthorpe,
The Next American Metropolis, 1993.

The Prospect Project

Architect:

Jonathan Reich AIA, Architects
Sandy Stannard, AIA
Brogan Thomsen

Seattle, WA

Owner:

Sounds Good

Neighborhood Advocate:

Dale Rowe

Project Summary & Jury Comments

The homeowners seek to modify a property originally featured as a Seattle Times/AIA Home of the Month, to add access and plumbing/appliances to furnish a small living unit. The project offers a worthwhile challenge to the current ADU code, which does not allow ADUs within townhouses.



This is a proposal to simply install a second kitchen in an existing short-platted "single-family townhouse" in order to create an "Accessory Dwelling Unit" or "ADU."

Installing a few kitchen fixtures seems pretty insignificant in the bigger scheme of things — that is, after building this whole place...

